

**MY BODY:
DESIGN AND
ARCHITECTURE
and
CONVALESCENCE**

Two Stories

Bruce Benderson

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Red Dust New York 2013

“My Body: Design and Architecture” was first published in French, translated by Laurence Viallet in the catalogue *airs de paris, exposition présentée au centre pompidou, galerie 1, du 25 avril au 16 août 2007*.

“Convalescence” was published in an earlier draft under the title “Old World Manners” in the anthology *Brothers of the Night*, ed. Michael Rowe, and Thomas S. Roche 1997; and on line in both English and Romanian translation in *egophobia* (www.egophobia.ro) 2012.

Published in the United States of America 2013
Convalescence and My Body: Design Architecture Two Stories

Published by Red Dust, Inc.

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ISBN 978-0-87376-104-8

**MY BODY:
DESIGN AND
ARCHITECTURE**

THANK YOU very much for your interest in re-assigning my body. First of all, let me say that, in conjunction with your very contemporary approach, there is no need to worry about any prudishness on my part, any embarrassment. I intend to reveal my history, express all my desires as well as insecurities.

And now, may I explain how I think I developed such a severe body dysmorphic disorder, or would you call it gender dysfunction? You're the doctors, so you tell me. I can only state that I feel I can remember nearly the exact moment when my mother first allowed me into her bedroom as she was dressing. It was in the summer, before my third birthday, which is in August, so I'd suspect it was in . . . July. We were, in fact, spending our very first summer on that crystalline lake in upstate New York, which local legend described as the clearest and cleanest spring-fed lake in the world! And we were there because we had

money, you know, it was such a posh town, no Jews and all that . . .

I remember the soft pixilated effect of the very blue water of that lake as seen through the screen covering Mother's bedroom window, because at that very moment, she was placing a soft cone-shape, created with swirls of Georgette, on her head and adjusting the veil that covered half her face.

Do you remember the veils on hats women wore in those days? Perhaps you've seen pictures? Given the tendency for heavy foundation makeup at the time, along with the abundant use of rouge, and the passion for very, very red lipstick (*Love that Red!*, *Bricktop*, *Fire and Ice*, I remember all the names!), such veils gave the effect of concealing something very hierarchical, even precious, and maybe a little bit evil (although I'm just referring to an effect). Surprisingly, the use of eye shadow or mascara was still restrained in those days, but my mother—may we call her "Ayesha," or "Lucretia," for purposes of anonymity, though unfortunately, her name happened to be a lot drabber than that—had *enormous* eyes!

. . . Hm, now where was I? Something about . . . Oh, yes, the veil. There *was* something about it covering her rather deliciously remote (should I say, "maddeningly remote"?) enormous green eyes and producing the same effect as the screen that shielded me from the icy, (the lake was spring-fed, you see)

blue, blue, blue *purity* of the lake. But the strangest thing is, I can't remember the name of that lake, though we lived on it every summer for about ten years . . . No, I can't. It's one of many seemingly essential things I can't remember.

I do, however, recall how that veil intrigued, how I wished that Ayesha would (or could?) *never* take it off, and the thrill of imagining Lucretia eating with the veil on, bringing a corner of the crisp white napkin to the corner of flamingly red lips at intervals, as she sometimes did, after which the napkin was stained by a shocking spot of red . . . or lifting the very thin edge of a sparkling glass to those lips, as the edge of the veil grazed the glass's bulbous, transparent surface . . .

Surface, don't you love that word?

Where was I? Merely saying that perhaps the only activity I couldn't visualize being performed in that veil (I'm sure there were others, but remember, I wasn't quite three) was Ayesha *asleep* in it, a non-actuality that greatly disturbed me, for some reason.

Much more *important* than hats or veils, more closely related to the reason I sit before you today, was Lucretia's *corset*. *Black*, you see—not, of course, when she was in her white summer dresses, but almost all the other times . . .

Can you remember, for example, the proverbial *little black dress*? But—this was at a later age—I knew that every single other mother wore a *white* girdle. I'd

even seen one or two at the homes of friends, after our play led us into their mothers' closets while the moms were downstairs preparing a snack, or something like that. And I always took the initiative in play, and would encircle the soft, thin wrist of a playmate with my thumb and forefinger (I chose children much smaller than me with whom to play), and lead "it" into the closet (I mean "the child," but—except in the case of my mother—I simply detest gendered adjectival pronouns, or that awkward contemporary solution of using both with "or," or even worse, "they," as if employing the plural incorrectly would solve the problem) . . . and then lead that child deep into recesses of the closet, where there was always that *powdery scent* (mixed with a hint of old perspiration, I suppose, though how could I have identified it as such since I still had no odor—which is why children certainly don't ever wear deodorant, correct?) . . . to experience a thrilling intimation of *suffocation*, caused by the cool, superficial caress of dry satin or nylon against my mouth, and the gentle abrasion of tulle appliqué. And shrouded in these . . . *fabbbb-rrrrrics*, I'd clasp the frail little body about the waist and press *it* (yes, I prefer an article here, too) against my (oh, I do want to say *its* here, as well!) larger body.

Strange? Remember, I was only a child! But I still think this is where it started, the notion (*you'd* call it an illusion) that I already was what I desperately

wanted to be: a thing, frail but lithe, and perhaps . . . *blond*? . . . without the slightest hint of hair anywhere on its trunk, on its legs, buttocks . . . arms, unless maybe it was a faint blond down that is barely visible on the delicate skin . . .

Hmm . . . Does the image appeal to you? Perhaps you should ask yourself why. On the other hand, my description is so faulty. That wasn't what I wanted to be at all. It wasn't just the quality of *surface* (that word again!) that I was re-envisioning. It was the *structure*. Are you shocked? Yes, at times, I know, you yourselves must deal with structure, when it comes to *gender re-assignment*, for example. And even when you're dealing with surface appearance, which is most of the time, you sometimes find your scalpel probing deeper, deeper, into the muscular structure . . . but as for me, I wanted to be more than what I've just described, I wanted to escape *all signification*, because it's "wrong." Have you considered the fact that anything that sticks out of you—that is salient, shall we say?—is under the threat of cultural interpretation (a kind of decapitation, isn't it)?

I don't have to tell you *that*. You've read your *theory*, etc. So I suppose what *it* (there I go again! you know I mean "I") wanted to be was little more than a *surface*. And what would one call such an *entity*? Something larval? Or a mollusk. But even that—right away, because it has three dimensions—leads to a

womblike connotation. Is there no way to escape *both* phallic and receptive implications and communicate? Well, there must be, I've always thought. But then what do you become? Are you even an *object*? The moment there are more than two dimensions you become something beyond your control.

I can see this is disturbing you. So I'll resort to a euphemism, an abstraction. I'll say that I wanted to escape being "architectural." Is that any more palatable? It was the only way to escape all the silly categories in which our culture places us, wouldn't you agree? And besides, my mother . . . Hmm . . . *Lucretia*, forbade any subjects other than herself. *And perhaps I agreed with her!* You decide.

Yes, I am getting into theory. At the same time as being personal. But if you don't mind, I'd like to get *out of it*. And get out of it I *did*. For quite a while I think I'd managed to escape any implications of gender. It was something that went way beyond my activities with children, which I'd begun to detest—not for cliché reasons, I have no sentimentality about the protection of children, and I even believe that their egos develop at such an early stage that they are indeed capable of "choice." After all, there are *children who murder*, aren't there?

Excuse me. I didn't mean to offend anyone. I don't wish to break the law any more, either. At any rate, you must know all about this, it must be in my file . . . that

soon I began to suspect that there was a consciousness beyond all of this that represented a far more dramatic state of regression. It was a thrilling discovery: the concept that real freedom resides in *regression*, not in the further development of signs, significations, complexes and other socially interwoven patterns . . . A way of escaping the fact that a life has essentially been a *hollowness* supported by a traditional structure. Yes, I actually thought I could escape the net of karma, and still go on “living . . .”

Paraphilic infantilism seemed to provide that for a while. People speak of it as if it's some kind of sexual fetish, but actually, it's a better mind-emptier than the most advanced systems of meditation. With or without diapers. The evaporation of the will into the capable, burdened arms of another, the rocking motion . . . The lapse into powerlessness and *sexual innocence*, the evaporation of any self-consciousness or *gender anxiety*.

Hmm . . . it was during one of these sessions that the idea came to me that there could be a more radical way to cut short the generation of representations—at least for a few moments, and discover *smoothness*. I know it was a dangerous idea. You must understand that the only place I could find such services I am now discussing was in a dungeon run by an unpleasant novelist-madam, and because I was such a faithful customer of paraphilic infantilism, or perhaps be-

cause the novelist found me a *resource to mine*, or perhaps only because all they wanted was to laugh at me, once a session was over and I had resumed a social identity by getting dressed, I'd be asked to stay, perhaps to have a drink with the novelist, around whom sometimes milled a couple of off-duty "workers."

During one of those down times I overheard a rather heated discussion between the madam-novelist and one of the workers. It seems that the former wanted a certain client-service provided by the latter to *cease*. It involved—rather astonishingly, I thought at the time—a "client" who insisted on having pressure applied to the carotid artery, carrier of the principal blood supply to the brain! Before and after, the client was quite vocal about the exquisiteness of the experience, and it (well, "he") used the word *release*. But the madam-novelist greatly feared an *accident*, a scandal involving the police . . .

It wasn't difficult at all to time my leaving one day when the expert on applying pressure to the carotid artery was leaving as well. And of course, I was impelled to do so by the intimation that pressure services might lead, temporarily of course, to the erasure of all *qualities*. But there was one major *impediment*. The pressure expert was an Oriental. And no matter how sublime this transcendent experience promised to be, I absolutely refused to be degraded in such a way.

Ahem . . . hmm. So you see, I am not entirely without principles.

There was, however, a solution close at hand. With the usual sense of accommodation, with which such individuals are “gifted,” the pressure expert suggested a more acceptable colleague, who showed up at my apartment the very next day.

I told you that I had no intention of succumbing to any unnecessary prudery in talking to you, so I’ll admit to you that I anticipated our meeting with an excitement that can only be described as *nuptial*. I had requested, as well, that she (yes, in this case I am more than happy to employ such a discriminative pronoun!) obscure half her face with a veil. Surely the pre-phallic wholeness inaccessible to all of us once we are capable of expressing a desire for it was about to be returned by some magic, if only *for a few precious moments!*

Hmm . . . Yes.

But wait! I sense a lasciviousness coming over all of you! I can feel it pressing against me like the flesh of a cold fish. Be forewarned that I am neither an object of desire nor a procurer of it! Neither role interests me . . .

Do you understand? Then, to go on:

. . . As anyone who has indulged in erotic strangulation can tell you, the complimentary stimulation of “organs residing down there” (suddenly, I feel too—shall we say, “maidenly,” for lack of a better term—to be any more precise) and denial of blood to the brain produces a sensual transcendence that has little to do with language or form, and doubtlessly not at all that

much to do with what we call existence. From this opiated pinnacle brought on by the pressure, I felt myself swiftly pouring into *nothingness* . . .

And that, apparently, was how I ended up here, and eventually found my way to you. I must have plunged too far into non being, and my glimpse of a consciousness minus the obfuscations of symbolism was indeed brief and is of course partly alien to memory, that *cesspool of corpse-symbols*.

Please realize that I have not delved into these personal secrets for any idle reason! I am, instead, hoping that you will now understand my urgency to accomplish the surgery I have in mind as soon as possible, in fact . . . to achieve a form of existence that is equal to a poreless surface *impregnable to meaning*. I've grown to detest every appendage of the body and its phallic implications, from so-called "fingers and toes" to limbs, not to mention that builder of destructive mental structures, the tongue, and its coarser, even more betraying brother at the southern extremities. So all of them must go. I know what I'm asking you is radical: to restore me from my dysmorphic disorder to an antimorphic *naught*. But let's start the surgery as soon as possible. I'm not demanding any "complete makeover," as you are used to providing, but just a complete *unmaking*, the anti-creation of a subject *without qualities*. I imagine that this will be your *masterpiece*! No salience will be immune to your ampu-

tating artistry. Begin your work with a scalpel with no restraint whatsoever! Show me the perfect roundness of *zero*—the circularity of Ayesha's arms!



CONVALESCENCE

A DRUG ADDICT and alcoholic, I was fresh out of several years in the worst, most derelict bars imaginable, determined once and for all to put an end to my downward spiral. Because my favorite addiction had been crack, I knew that even the most insignificant word or image could start the chain of associations going—an energy synapse series with a conductive will of its own.

“Smoke,” “match,” “rock,” the sight of an unbent wire hanger like the one I had habitually used to dig out my glass pipe, a certain odor, or an inkling of police presence on the street suddenly took on a kind of fetishized eroticism, bringing me back to the past where the close air of a sealed-off room, the isolation of out-of-date jazz and occasional voice-overs from a TV left carelessly on all contributed to the heightened atmosphere of onanism.

Crack pipe in hand, I had seen time telescope into a jagged series of arousals and climaxes, as I lay en-

folded within an endless and ecstatic state of orgasmic disintegration. Continual masturbation, aided at times by a videotape or an underclass prostitute, but often spurred purely by a cascading imagination, was fueled by frequent inhalations from the pipe. And only when the last rock had melted into smoke did the crawling, searching nightmare for more of the life substance descend upon me with all its horror. Then consciousness was compacted into a ghoulish struggle, as each gesture became fraught with imminent failure, and life slipped through my fingers like sand through the hand of a skeleton.

As time went on, even continual inhalations could not delay the encroachment of time. An ever blacker tide of dying was swallowing me up with maddening slowness. It wasn't long before I subjected myself to recovery. I was aware that the public testimonies and self-accounting of the recovery process owed much to Luther; but, off-putting as such a thought was, I was determined to undergo this contemporary form of conversion. I swallowed my distaste and gave myself up to the repetitive spiritual biographies designed to break down defenses and make me surrender to the recovery community.

Within a year I felt confident enough to return to normal life. I had planned to take up again the profession of scholar, which I'd abandoned for almost a decade in favor of my addictions. Fortunately, I'd

chanced upon an unusual opportunity. A disabled French scholar whose name had meant a great deal to me in my youthful academic days had placed a small ad in a journal asking for a temporary assistant. He was a specialist in a fin-de-siècle writer known for his decadent excesses and for a later zealous conversion to conservative Catholicism. Within a week my letter had been answered, and arrangements were made for my voyage to the French Alps, where the scholar was now living in a sanitarium.

It was in the mountains, fifty miles from Grenoble, that the scholar had been sent for a lengthy, perhaps terminal, convalescence. The tumor that had shrunk him to skeletal proportions had not responded to treatment, and the disease had spread to the rest of his body. Wracked by toothaches and migraines, the famous scholar of the infamous late-nineteenth-century yellow-book writer found himself following in the footsteps to Calvary of the very man who had been the object of his lifetime of study. For that man had himself spent his last years in excruciating pain while living near a monastery as its oblate.

This mirroring process was merely the last cycle in a series, considering that the late-nineteenth-century writer who was the subject of my employer's-to-be study had himself emulated medieval sages, among them the formidable alchemist and monster Gilles de Rais who had once fought beside Joan of Arc. After

writing his treatise on Gilles de Rais, the writer had also undergone an intense religious conversion, in hopes of avoiding the bestial urges that had come with too much familiarity of Gilles de Rais's bloodthirsty practices. But even his pious impulses had taken on a sumptuous tinge that could have been described as decadent or lurid. Only those saints whose sacrifices could imply an insatiable masochism seemed capable of inspiring his imagination to devotion. As in the work of the late medieval artist Mattheus Grunewald, whose paintings never ceased to fascinate the convert, the drama of fall and redemption merely promised more vicious scenarios. He went so far as to devote an entire book to the late medieval Dutch saint Lydwine of Schiedam, whose flesh had rotted to the bone and whose loins had been the home of enormous tapeworms—although the fluids she exuded smelled like cinnamon. To make matters worse, while in the prime of his talents, the now religious writer suffered unbearable pain in the region of the mouth and eventually discovered that he was suffering from terminal cancer of the palate. Thus did the writer, and, almost a century later, his most devoted scholar, suffer very similar fates.

With a pounding heart I swerved through the mute landscape of rock, grass and patches of snow up a peak close to Mount Blanc, whose razor silhouette could actually be glimpsed from time to time through

the crabapple trees. A wind seemed to explode their blossoms from the branches, spraying them against my windshield. The exhilaration I felt for the first time since my addiction reawakened my hope that I had not broken all libidinous ties to the world but could once again vigorously partake in the pleasures of sensuality.

Soon I reached the mountain peak and the sanitarium, housed in a former monastery, and currently staffed by nuns. As I was shown to a small white cell with a cot, washbasin and writing desk, instructed to appear at meals promptly and handed a schedule of events that included prayer and meditation, the sinking realization came upon me that being a visitor of the sick, I would be expected to enter their austere code.

Here illnesses of all persuasions, from tuberculosis to AIDS, were reduced, if not in theory, at least in sensibility, to the same context of original sin, and no one questioned the sick person's duty—or right—to the correct, nearly silent life of the terminally ill Catholic. The kinds of discussions that tend to establish hierarchies in a community weren't considered meaningful here, as all had been reduced to the identical final stage.

Within this sobering atmosphere, I was brought to the Professor, an emaciated man with wispy, transparent hair and an inflamed, peeling face. Pulling

himself up from a carved wooden chair by means of a walker, he extended a limp hand. He was, he said, anxious to take a ride down the mountain up which I had just come, and without so much as another word, struggled from the room, signaling me to follow. We were intercepted by one of the nuns, who in cautionary tones reminded him that the obligatory luncheon was about to be served and went so far as to lead us away from the outside doors and into the dining room. She barely was able to look into the Professor's face, seeming to find some kind of unholy terror in the sight of his emaciation.

At the rows of white-clothed tables sat patients and guests in a cocoon of decrepitude and discretion. Our frugal meal consisted of a tolerable red wine, a soup that was only a thin, unsalted root puree, some steamed fish and macaroni covered with a béchamel that I declined. The plates were brought by waiters in black trousers and white jackets, whose crisp service seemed yet another kind of discipline for both patient and staff. Opposite me sat a woman whose sight had been affected by a tumor, and her daughter, a teenager whose blank expression didn't mask her frustration in being helpless to do something for her mother. Having been told that I was an American, the mother released a small cascade of good English, after which we began to eat in silence. The Professor took a spoonful of the soup, seemed not to be able to swallow it, and gave up.

I brought the gruel to my lips, hyperconscious of the sound of my spoon touching its plate. Slowly it became obvious to me, as if I were observing from afar, that an entire other commentary overlaid this banal ritual, designed to produce a mute and anguished reconciliation with a landscape oblivious to human suffering in its immutable materiality. But my gradual surrender to this commentary was suddenly broken by a plaintive voice that sliced through my reverie with a feeling of absurdity.

“... the crust is sheer delight, and the gratiné really like no other. It seems the cows feeding on mountain grass get more magnesium than in the other parts of the region, giving all their dairy products, and especially this marvelous cheese, a certain aftertaste.”

It was the woman with the tumor again, and her gloomy attempt at small talk, again in English, merely reminded all of us that even the strict but sensual etiquette of French table conversation could not conceal our awareness of the fact that, in this place, the spirit was being gradually coaxed to loosen its grip on the body. Even her teenage daughter compressed her lips and colored, and the rest of my meal was passed in pure silence.

When we were finally allowed to begin our afternoon drive, my employer was bundled into his Scottish shawl and pushed toward the exit in a wooden wheelchair. We moved briskly across the polished

floor of the dim corridor, broken at regular lengths by squares of harsh light coming through window panes in wooden doors, which reminded me in a melancholy way of those in prewar elementary school classrooms.

When we burst into an even harsher blaze of sun coming through the glass doors leading outside, the Professor's voice broke out into a raspy drone.

"I hope you don't mind beginning immediately. When we come back tonight you will find a large canvas sheath on my dresser containing a manuscript with which I would like you to become familiar. There's an enormous amount of work waiting for you."

The width of the corridor made it impossible to walk beside the wheel chair, and I continued some distance behind, hoping my silence was enough to signal my acquiescence.

When we finally were outside, the nun who'd been pushing the wheelchair so speedily left us, in a manner that suggested she was quite familiar with the procedure. Immediately she was replaced by a scruffy local of about thirteen who jumped abruptly onto our path. He had a flattened, feline snout and a big impudent smile that would have looked like a leer on an older person.

"I hope you won't mind including my little friend in our downward jaunt!" said the Professor, whose words sounded like an incantation. Immediately the

boy grabbed the wheelchair with dirty, callused hands and trotted toward the parking lot with it.

At the car, the boy lifted the frail Professor out of the wheelchair and into his wiry arms. There was a wolfish gleam of content in the professor's eyes as he gazed with happy familiarity at the boy, who seemed, surprisingly enough, to return the look—if a bit impishly. The boy placed him on the front seat and hopped into the back without a word. I snatched a quick, rather peeved look at his lanky frame as I climbed into the driver's seat. I took in his thick, peltish black hair and his flawless skin, which was so pale that the circles under his mean-looking almond-shaped eyes looked bluish. His famished cheeks formed two shadows over a gleaming, impudent mouth and a tiny pink tongue that nervously kept it lubricated.

I wondered if he were a peasant from further down the mountain. The stains on his rolled-cuff woolens had to be mud, or manure; and those tiny pinprick scratches on his neck and forearms were probably from fieldwork.

The air became heavier and the light denser as I steered the car down the spiraling mountain road, waiting for my employer to broach the subject of work. As I rounded each curve, he swayed slightly, one raw red claw weakly gripping the dashboard.

At the moment it seemed as if everything were about to gel irrevocably into frozen silence, he ven-

tured a comment, "Spring has come late this year," and then lapsed again into autism, staring passively at the brilliant, glittering landscape rushing by, almost as if he were aware that his suffering both welded him to unstoppable outpourings of nature and at the same time forbid him any real enjoyment of it.

I myself was suddenly filled with a longing to bond with the exploding blossoms and chilly cascades of water reverberating on stone, whose cathectic vitality released yearnings again for hyper-stimulation, recalling countless nights in which a glass stem streaming with plasticine smoke turned every cell of my body into pure process. How I longed for that shortcut to dilation. After all, I too was recovering.

Strangely enough, we were passing a café named Le Relais, a word that can refer to a relay race or a truck stop, but also implies refreshment or renewal, based on the assumption that we are living in a reality riveted by relentless beginnings. I backed up until the car was in front of the café, thinking that we are continually casting off the rotting built up by time and going back to the point we were before hunger, thirst and fatigue reminded us of our diminishing. It was as if we were constantly hoping to go nowhere.

Would the Professor mind wasting a few moments for a drink? I asked timidly. We could sit on the terrace and talk about the research he wanted me to help him with.

He climbed painfully from the car with the boy's help, testily warning me, "You cannot trust their aperitifs here. Too much stem and leaf, not enough fruit."

We sat at an outdoor table under the sinking sun where we ordered those aperitifs and where I was sure that he would begin to discuss our project. Our small terrace was situated on a kind of esplanade cut into the slope of the mountain, near a torrent, and a harsh light pierced us obliquely, as if nailing us and our tables and chairs to their shadows.

"That's the mountains for you," complained the Professor "The sun shines through the thin air, and it's utterly scalding. You pass into the shade, and the cold lashes through you like a knife."

I brought up the subject of the manuscripts yet again, but the Professor interrupted me with a nearly phobic insistency. "Nobody seems to recall that his most extravagant flights of inspiration were the result of his dangerous liaisons with lowlifes!" he said about the writer we would be researching. "No one remembers how he broke his ties with the suffocating world of the ever fatter, more banal bourgeoisie."

Piped through the chasm of stone in which we were seated, his words mixed with the rush of water in the torrent and took on a giddy, brittle intensity that pulverized my attention into anxiety. Now he was talking about food, a kind of leek cooked in bouillon flavored with cognac, which he'd always wanted to try.

The more he veered from what I considered our main subject, the more perplexed, distressed and suspicious about the Professor's mental health I became. And yet I felt strangely identified with his careening words, which made me remember how crack-inspired thoughts used to rattle through my own head.

Despite my evident discomfort, his chatter rushed monotonously from him like the torrent, endlessly spattering me with staccato insistency, his head darting about like a bird and his eyes fixing from time to time on the boy. I doubted the boy could understand a word he was saying, even though he grinned back brazen and glassy-eyed, until the Professor stopped speaking and devoured him with tragic, plaintive eyes.

"He's a local," said the Professor, flashing a knowing look at me that I couldn't interpret, while the boy bit at the dirty nail of one hand and peered at us from the edge of his glass of watered-down white wine. "In fact he's something of a casualty." Suddenly the boy resolutely and noisily sucked the rest of the wine down. The professor moved his eyes away from him and focused on the snow-capped peak of Mount Blanc in the distance, touched by the setting sun.

"Speaking of snow," he blurted out, "are you a devotee of *oeuf à la neige*?"

"It's kind of a meringue floating in a sauce anglaise, isn't it?" I answered rather tersely, perhaps betraying my annoyance for the first time. "But I wish

we could talk about the research I'll be helping you with." I really didn't want to hear another word about *oeuf à la neige*. It was especially disgusting to see someone that ill waxing on with culinary greed.

For a moment his eyes refocused, and he asked me how comfortable I was with the colloquial, non-literary French of that period but again veered abruptly into a wistful description of the boy's Alpine dialect, which resembled what they spoke just over the border in Italy, on the other side of Mont Blanc, where most of the names ended in -az and where one could visit the city of Aosta, a name that is a corruption of Augustus, as in Caesar.

I listened tensely, trying to deny to myself that his sudden swerves of context were symptoms of a mental deterioration, as my eyes anxiously swept past the other tables in an effort to avoid his darting gaze.

"Have you ever heard it?" he asked.

"Heard what?" "That dialect."

For the first time I noticed a woman sitting at a nearby table, her eyes cast to her feet, and I remembered that this was a mountain of more than one sanitarium, including one for the mentally ill. Her eyebrows had been redrawn on her face, and she was wearing a turban, perhaps to conceal a hairless cranium. Behind her was a red-faced old man wearing a wool cap, most likely an employee in one of the sanitariums, and further toward the edge of the esplanade

and downing a pastis was someone I had seen at our luncheon. He was very thin and about sixteen and also had the hairless pate of a chemotherapy patient.

"They're from the sanitariums," said the Professor, catching my gaze with a kind of eerie satisfaction.

"You mean they let them drink?"

The Professor did not bother to respond, and in this I thought I detected a note of contempt for my remark. I avoided looking at his aperitif. Then I heard myself insisting that we leave, that we had better go back up the peak before the sun set. With a shrug, the Professor pushed himself to an unsteady standing position and took the boy's arm with his claw of a hand.

By the time I had started the car, some of my annoyance had subsided. In an attempt to establish some context of conversation between myself and the Professor, I said, "They're rather severe up there at the sanitarium, aren't they? They run the place like a convent. Have you gotten to know any of the other . . . guests?"

"One woman who has a blood disease," the Professor replied flatly. "We took a chair to the mountain peak once. She keeps her distance now. I'm sure she's told some of the other patients what I have."

The tone astonished me. It was cautious, almost conspiratorial, with a hint of a boast. I turned onto the road a bit rudely, and the Professor was jerked forward; the frail, raw hand was again extended to grasp the dashboard. The boy in the back seat tumbled side-

ways and let out a rude, boisterous laugh. The anxiety that had invaded me before returned and made me increase my speed. We passed one village after another at each small plateau, with cars parked around its single café. I found myself wondering if I knew anything at all about the professor's illness beyond a couple of facts, and from what he'd just said about another patient keeping her distance, I had a fleeting, irrational fear that it could be contagious, but I couldn't believe that a French sanitarium would allow close contact with such a patient.

"You must stop this driving," said the Professor suddenly. "It's making me ill." And indeed he did seem to have a new pallor underneath the red, peeling skin.

I parked in front of the next café and went around to the other side to help the Professor from the car. There was a woman outside, her face and forearm a patchwork of scars, in the act of mailing a postcard. From inside the café came raucous music, boisterous voices. Thinking that the inside would be unacceptable for the Professor due to noise and foul air, I suggested we go back to the car and sit in it with the windows rolled down, but his energy seemed to have returned all of a sudden. He took my wrist and pulled me forward, and the boy followed us, as if participating in a game.

It was a tawdry, boisterous café, with workers in caps and woollens sprawled along the zinc counter

overloaded with pastis or beer, as well as some local teenagers arguing by a pinball machine and some blowsy women who may have been prostitutes and moved back and forth between the bar and some of the tables to cajole a few sullen-looking men who sat drinking alone. I maneuvered the Professor to a table as far away from the music and hubbub as possible. "Where did all these drunks come from?" I said irritably.

"They're from the sanatorium mostly," replied the Professor with the same eerie satisfaction.

This time I didn't say, "You mean they let them drink?"

Perhaps oiled by the cognac he himself had ordered, the Professor began to talk about our work. He said the reason he had asked me if I was familiar with the vernacular of that period is because we'd be working on a handwritten manuscript from Lyon—one of a kind—that did not rely upon literary language. "You'll need a bit of courage to face it," said the Professor, a trace of irony compressing the corners of his mouth. "It was secretly culled, I suspect, by our author from a certain cult hiding in the slopes of Lyon, which was, as you must know, the mystical center of France. And it was found among his possessions after his death, thought to have been destroyed—but no."

"Did he use it to research his great novel of the lower depths?" I asked.

The Professor shook his head and, as he had established a precedent to do, ignored my wondering glance. "Those slopes above the rivers of Lyon," he went on, "were notorious for sheltering brigands, fugitives, and especially enemies of the church. And what is described in these pages . . . Well, not even the successor to the Prophet Eugene Vintras, the formidable Abbe Boullan, who successfully applied poultices of excreta to psychic wounds and compelled nuns to drink their urine for their own protection, ever spoke of the practices discussed in these pages."

"We're they that horrendous?" I asked.

"Well, they certainly were the most brutal antidote for that ever fatter, more banal middle class I believe I mentioned."

"Messieurs, please."

The man standing before our table was squat and florid with powerful arms, in his sixties. A scar on his weathered neck.

"You're from the sanitarium, aren't you? Would it trouble you to take me with you back to the top?"

Impossible, since we are going down the mountain, not up, I wanted to say, although I had every intention of going back up as soon as we left the café. But I caught the cautionary look in the Professor's eyes, which I interpreted as the solidarity of the sick, and felt obliged to say, "But it's getting late, isn't it. Yes, come with us. We should all be heading back."

The man fixed me in his frank gaze. "You'll be leaving now, or will you give this old-timer a moment for another pastis?"

"Have your pastis, friend," said the Professor in a voice suddenly gracious and relaxed, before I could say anything. "We don't mind waiting."

The drinker grinned, showing inflamed gums, and offered the three of us to join him, but we refused. Promising not to be a moment, the man mounted a barstool, ordering a pastis for himself as well as for a certain Marie, a middle-aged woman exploding with curls and clasping a Pekinese to her swollen bosom. As they downed their glasses, she chucked her florid companion's cheek and entertained him with mock sobs at the thought of his leaving so soon.

Was it my recent experiences with recovery that so soured my reaction to the sight of a sick man downing a pastis while indulged by a local prostitute, until finally I heard myself say sulkily to the Professor, "Take a look around you, we are in a pub of ill people. That woman is wearing a wig, and that one carousing with that man over there is just a Frankenstein of scars."

"Well," answered the Professor, and I thought I again detected a note of contempt, "perhaps you don't understand how boring and monotonous death can be."

When our passenger re-approached moments later, he was weaving dangerously. He stumbled after

us to the car and sat next to the boy in the back seat. However, I had not made more than two or three hair-pin turns up the mountain toward the sanitarium before the professor complained of my driving again and commanded me to stop. He was getting nauseous, he said, and couldn't bear the to and fro of the curves without resting. As for our new passenger, he had fallen into a noisy snooze, his head tilted back against the seat behind us.

As we sat in the car by the side of the road, I noticed the sky darkening. In fact, it would be night in another half hour. A tense silence seemed to have crept with the darkness into the car. As it did, I thought I heard the breathing of the Professor deepen into relief. The boy began to hum a mindless tune to himself. The drunken local woke up and gazed around in confusion. Some intuition seized him. With a look close to panic, he quickly thanked us and said he preferred to walk the rest of the way, opened the car door and nearly leapt out, then staggered up the road.

The boy went back to the humming of his mindless tune. Over and over its empty little intervals spilled into the darkness. And with each degree of darkness, the tune got slower and more deliberate.

Then a flashlight pierced the trees. A fist rapped on the window next to the Professor's face. I bent over him to wind the window down, and a middle-aged man poked his head into the car.

“Has your car broken down?”

He was porcine and ruddy, and in the darkness, above his turtleneck, floated a fat neck and a falsely solicitous smile. I couldn't help thinking of the “ever fatter, more banal middle class” the Professor had grumbled about. “Have you had a breakdown?” he asked again.

The boy lunged forward from the back seat and grabbed him by the head, managing to roll up the window to wedge it within the frame. The Professor sank his teeth in above the turtleneck. The neck struggled and dug against the window's edge, but the boy kept it jammed in place. Tremblingly the old man drank his fill, while the stranger's face changed from coagulated red to ashen gray.

The Professor fell back against the seat and smiled beatifically. His mouth was crimson and dripping. “So many things that were known have been forgotten,” he said, as if explaining. His ancient face convulsed into a rictus of laughter, which shook his body with such force that I was afraid his ribs would snap. The effort had to have been too much for him, because it was cut off suddenly. His head fell to his chest and his body crumbled against the car door as if he were unconscious—or dead.

Blood trickled like rivers of liberty and appetite from the pallid neck attached to the lifeless head lodged in the window frame. The boy bent forward to

take a drop of it onto the tip of his finger, brought it to his mouth, but stopped midway and sweetly extended it toward my face. His pointy tongue flicked back and forth seductively, from the wet hole of his gleaming mouth.

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ISBN 978-0-87376-104-8



Red Dust New York 2013